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FOR ARA/SC

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR  
 TAGS: SHUM, PGOV, UY  
 SUBJ: SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION AND HUMAN RIGHTS--CODEL  
 - MONTGOMERY IN URUGUAY

REF: MONTEVIDEO 974

1. C - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY DRAWN TO DEPARTMENT'S ATTENTION THE GOU'S GROWING SENSITIVITY ABOUT OUR PUBLIC STATEMENTS OF CONCERN REGARDING THE TRANSITION. AS A COROLLARY, THE GOU ALSO APPRECIATES AN OCCASIONAL PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT THE POLITICAL TRANSITION WITH ITS ATTENDANT DAILY PROBLEMS IS PRIMARILY A MATTER FOR URUGUAYANS THEMSELVES TO SETTLE. THE FOLLOWING SEQUENCE RELATED TO FEBRUARY 16 LIFTING OF THE PRESS CENSORSHIP ON WEEKLIES MAY ILLUSTRATE THE POINT.

3. DURING ITS CALL ON FOREIGN MINISTER MAESO, FEBRUARY 15, THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES DELEGATION LED BY CONGRESSMAN SONNY MONTGOMERY WAS DRAWN INTO AN IMPROMPTU PRESS CONFERENCE. THE JOURNALISTS QUESTIONED VERY INSISTENTLY WHAT UNITED STATES WAS DOING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN URUGUAY AND HOW THE UNITED STATES VIEWED THE ONGOING PRACTICE OF PRIOR CENSORSHIP IN URUGUAY. CHAIRMAN MONTGOMERY DECLINED TO BE DRAWN INTO COMMENTS ON URUGUAY, NOTING THAT HIS DELEGATION WAS INTERESTED IN THE WORK OF THE ARMED SERVICES AND HAD NOT COME TO "INVESTIGATE OR DISCUSS HUMAN RIGHTS OR POLITICAL OPENINGS." WHILE HE CLEARLY AFFIRMED SUPPORT FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, MONTGOMERY POINTED OUT THAT HE WAS NEITHER QUALIFIED NOT INCLINED TO OFFER OPINIONS ABOUT THE PRESS SITUATION IN URUGUAY.

4. THE JOURNALISTS' QUESTIONS, HOWEVER, CLEARLY IRKED THE FOREIGN MINISTER WHO, AFTER THE INTERVIEW WAS OVER, BRIEFLY PARTED FROM HIS CONGRESSIONAL GUESTS TO REMONSTRATE WITH THE MEN OF THE PRESS. "SOVEREIGN URUGUAY DOES NOT NEED OR ACCEPT FROM ABROAD--FROM ANY COUNTRY--GUIDANCE OR TUTELAGE IN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR." THAT COMMENT THE FOLLOWING DAY SHARED HEADLINES WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE GOU WAS LIFTING THE PRE-CENSORSHIP RESTRICTIONS IT HAD INSTITUTED LAST DECEMBER.

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84 3509583

SCR

PAGE 002

NC 3509583

TOR: 010730Z MAR '84

5. WERE THE CODEL'S LOW-KEY REMARKS AND THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE GOU DECISION RELATED? WITHOUT PROPOSING A POST HO ERGO PROPTER HOC CONNECTION, CLEARLY A STRONG STATEMENT--HOWEVER WELL INTENTIONED--AT THAT SENSITIVE MOMENT COULD WELL HAVE COMPLICATED OR EVEN ABORTED THE GOU'S DECISION TO MAKE THE ANNOUNCEMENT. THE HEADLINE, "U.S. CONGRESSMEN CONCERNED ABOUT ABRIDGEMENT OF PRESS FREEDOMS" WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN A WELCOME COMPANION TO A PROUD GOVERNMENT'S STATEMENT ON LIFTING CENSORSHIP. IN THAT SENSE, QUIET CONGRESSIONAL DIPLOMACY WORKED IN KEEPING THE WAY CLEAR FOR THE GOU ANNOUNCEMENT--A USEFUL PRECEDENT TO KEEP IN MIND AS WE MOVE ALONG TOWARD ELECTIONS IN WHAT PROMISES TO BE A YEAR WITH ITS SHARE OF ROUGH SPOTS. ARANDA  
END OF MESSAGE

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